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ABSTRACT

Special arrangements for the teaching of English to New Canadians (children who are recently-landed immigrants, or those for whom English is a second language) have existed at the primary level for five years. The most frequent approach involved children leaving their regular classes to meet in special classes, varying in size, and duration and frequency of lessons. Results of the study support the continuation and extension of English instruction programs. Results of a questionnaire administered to principals of the seven schools involved in the program are included. (DLG)

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RESEARCH REPORT

A Review of the Provisions in Vancouver Schools for New Canadians at the Primary Level

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Marilyn J. Reid and Lynne Guinet

Research Report 71-18

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Department of Planning and Evaluation
Board of School Trustees
1595 West 10th Avenue
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A REVIEW OF THE PROVISIONS IN VANCOUVER SCHOOLS FOR NEW CANADIANS AT THE PRIMARY LEVEL

I INTRODUCTION

Vancouver, in common with many North American cities, experiences a large influx of immigrants primarily from Europe and the Orient. This is an ongoing process. As many of these "New Canadians" are limited in their facility with English, the Vancouver School Board offers instruction in English for them.

As part of this programme, special provisions are made at the primary level in seven schools[1] for children who need this help. There are two categories of children who qualify for this assistance. The first of these includes children who come to school as recently-landed immigrants. The second is comprised of children from families for whom English is a second language, and whose progress in the primary grades is severely handicapped by their inability to cope with English. Many of the children in this latter category have been in Canada for several years (some for their whole lives), but have lived within closely-knit groups of their own cultures, and thus have had little exposure to English prior to starting school.

Policy for Primary New Canadian programmes is set by the B. C. Department of Education. A school can qualify for a Primary New Canadian Teacher

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[1] The schools are Grandview, Grandview Annex, Hastings, Macdonald, Lord Nelson, Admiral Seymour, and Lord Strathcona

by having a minimum of 15 to 20 eligible children between the ages of six and eight years. This number cannot include the New Canadians in Kindergarten, but if the school has such a teacher she is permitted to teach Kindergarten children as part of her load.

The policy for New Canadian programmes at the primary level is that children should come from their regular classes and meet in groups of varying size to receive special instruction in English from the Primary New Canadian Resource Teacher.

Vancouver has had a programme for Primary New Canadians for five years. For the first two of these all schools followed the specified format fairly closely. Since then, however, the schools have been allowed more freedom in planning their programmes. This has occurred partly because needs vary considerably from one school to another. Thus, there are now many variations in the arrangements for Primary New Canadians among and within schools. Approval for a programme must be obtained from the Vancouver School Board though, before it is instituted.

It is the purpose of this paper to review the special provisions in seven schools for New Canadians at the primary level.

II THE PRIMARY NEW CANADIAN PROGRAMMES IN VANCOUVER

Between February and June, 1971, visits were made by the writers to the seven schools to observe the teaching of Primary New Canadians and to discuss with the teachers the programmes for these children.

A. Organization

Arrangements for the teaching of New Canadians at the primary level varied considerably from one school to another.

Just who was considered a New Canadian and hence qualified for special attention depended on factors within each school. The percentage of children who were thought of as New Canadians was a main factor. At some schools this percentage was high (e.g., in one school 85% of the children were Chinese although not all were technically New Canadians). Sometimes this meant that only the most recent arrivals and those markedly handicapped in their use of English received special consideration. At other schools where there were fewer New Canadians, selection policies for special assistance were less stringent. Thus, children who received extra help at one school might not qualify for it at another.

The most common method involved removing children from their regular classes for periods of time and having a Primary New Canadian Resource Teacher work with them in groups. The length of each lesson and the size of groups varied both among and within schools. At the time of the observations this method accounted for part or all of the programme at six of the schools. At one school the Primary New Canadian Teacher enrolled a class of 23 children full-time for the duration of the school year. This class had begun with fewer pupils but others had been added to it periodically throughout the school year.

Although the Primary New Canadian Teachers were designated as such they did not all teach only Primary New Canadians. Actually, only three of the

seven teachers worked with these children exclusively. The other four had some combination of Primary New Canadians and other pupils. These other pupils were mostly (though not entirely) children from the regular classes who were in need of remedial work. There was much variation in the ratio of Primary New Canadians to other pupils for these teachers (one teacher had as few as three Primary New Canadians). Two teachers, as well as conducting groups, taught whole classes regularly as part of their schedule. The substance of these lessons was not consistent but generally was some form of language arts (not necessarily the teaching of English to New Canadians). A couple of teachers taught subjects other than English to their Primary New Canadian pupils (e.g., arithmetic) as they had to try to make up what the children were missing in their regular classes.

The total load of pupils differed among the teachers and seemed in a more or less constant state of flux for each teacher. Generally, children moved into and out of the programmes at irregular intervals, depending on need and available teacher time. As might be expected from the diversity of programmes there was no consistency among the teachers as to how many pupils they taught. One teacher, for instance, had a full-time class of 23 pupils, another saw 68 children in groups, while yet another saw 26 children individually and in groups and worked daily with four Kindergarten classes of approximately 28 pupils each.

In most schools, greatest attention was paid to the younger children, that is, those at the Kindergarten and Grade 1 levels. However, six of the seven teachers also taught a number of Grade 2 children and a few from Grades 3 and 4. Two teachers had some pupils from Grades 5 and 6.

When the teaching of English was to groups of New Canadians (which was most of the time and by most teachers) they ranged in size from two to thirteen participants; more commonly though, they were composed of five to ten children. The size of the group depended largely on need and age. The children in each group tended to be similar in age (e. g., all at a Grade 1 level). Most of the teachers felt this was more successful than grouping children of assorted ages and levels of maturity. Occasionally, children were seen individually or in pairs.

The duration of each group lesson varied from a few minutes (five or ten minutes in some instances) to 40 minutes (a regular school period). The average seemed to be around 25 to 30 minutes per group. As well as depending on need and availability, the time allotment was determined by the age and maturity of the children (older children generally had longer lessons than younger ones). In some schools efforts were made to have younger children seen early in the day before they became tired.

Most groups were scheduled for one lesson each school day. Some groups (usually older children) met three times per week. A few children, as well as being seen daily in groups, received extra attention.

B. Focus

All of the Primary New Canadian programmes in the study focussed on the development of oral communication skills, that is, on the understanding and use of spoken English. Lessons were entirely oral for all except a few children of Grade 3 and higher levels who did some reading and written work also. Many different techniques were employed, e.g., identification of objects, questions and answers, looking in mirrors. The most frequently used tools were the Peabody Language Development Kits (American Guidance Service, Inc.) Levels One and/or Two. The teachers spoke highly of the usefulness of these kits, and found them appropriate for all their New Canadian pupils.

C. Problems

A problem experienced by some schools is that many children remain, in essence, New Canadians for several years after entering school. In part, this is because they are surrounded at school by children who speak their own native tongue fluently, and they often speak little English outside of school.

Another common difficulty was the transiency of the students. By their nature new students arrived in Vancouver continually. Also, once here, many seemed to change their locations. This meant that school groupings and schedules for these New Canadians had to be reorganized frequently. The teachers had to be very adaptable.

On several occasions at some schools the writers noticed that children did not always appear for their English lessons at the times expected. Often

they arrived late, and some children didn't appear at all. Apparently, commitments in their regular classes prohibited or delayed their coming for their New Canadian instruction (e. g., had to finish their arithmetic first, or were taking P. E. with their regular class). One would think that this partial irregularity of attendance might decrease the efficiency of the programmes but teachers claimed that this was not a major problem.

A couple of other problems were noted or mentioned by the teachers. Some children became accustomed to the one teacher's voice and had difficulty understanding anyone else speaking English. Also, several teachers found Chinese children reticent by nature—some would talk only minimally or not at all.

D. Teachers' Comments

The kind of programme offered at each school was not always constant. A few schools varied, in some degree, their programme for Primary New Canadians from year to year, and some schools vary it within a given school year. Some schools anticipated fairly major changes in their programmes for the next school year. At one school, for instance, the Primary New Canadian Resource Teacher, who currently teaches groups of children, expects, next year, to enroll a regular Grade 1 class full-time. The teachers at this school decided to split the current four classes five ways (for Grade 1) with resulting smaller classes, each having some New Canadians as well as a large proportion of English speaking pupils. They feel this is the best way for the Primary New Canadians to learn English rather than being in classes of all non-English speaking children. In contrast, at another school, the teacher will enroll a class of about twenty Primary New Canadian children whom she will teach

all morning every day, at least for the first half of the year.

One teacher commented that she thought the best arrangement was to have children enrolled in regular classes but leave them to meet in groups for assistance with their English. This way, she said, children feel a part of the school as they mix with English speaking children more and not just with members of their own nationality.

Several teachers preferred to work with smaller groups, finding larger groups less effective and more unwieldy. Smaller groups, they thought, enabled even shy children to express themselves. One teacher remarked that a large part of the programme involved helping the children to socialize and to gain confidence.

Most of the teachers said they used a practical approach to teach a functional use of English and thought that this was the best method.

Many teachers commented that they thought it was important to start the Primary New Canadian programme at the Kindergarten level. One teacher also felt that Kindergarten children should stay on the programme for the whole school year.

Obviously, with so many variables, the programmes for New Canadians at the primary level in the seven schools in the study cannot reasonably be compared with each other in terms of their effectiveness in teaching English to these children.

III QUESTIONNAIRE TO PRINCIPALS

In June, 1971 questionnaires were completed by the principals of the seven schools in the study. A summary of their responses follows.

1. "What arrangements are made in your school for the teaching of English to New Canadians at the primary level?"

   All seven principals stated that each of their schools had a Primary New Canadian Teacher. Two commented that these teachers worked their full time, another 80% of her time, with Primary New Canadians. Three principals remarked that these teachers worked with small groups of children to teach them English.

2. "Please rate this programme (on a five-point scale) in terms of how well it succeeds at teaching English to these New Canadians."

   poor _____ _____ _____ 4 _____ 2 _____ excellent

   no comment - 1

   On this five-point scale with "1" representing "poor" and "5" representing "excellent", the mean rating by the principals was 4.33, i.e., close to the more positive end of the scale. This suggests that principals regarded highly the success of their current programmes in teaching English to Primary New Canadians.

3. "Please rate this programme (on a five-point scale) in terms of how much it impedes the progress of regular (non-New Canadian) students."

   does not impede 6 _____ _____ _____ _____ impedes greatly

   no comment - 1

   All six of the principals who responded to this question marked the farthest left point, i.e., they felt their programmes did not impede the progress of regular students.

4. "How do you think your programme for teaching English to New Canadians at the primary level could be improved?"

   Four principals answered this question. One of these thought that there was "no way" the programme at his school could be improved. One principal thought that it might be better to have a group that remained with the Primary New Canadian Teacher every day for some weeks or months, as occurs in a regular New Canadian class. Another, whose school employs largely this approach, thought that it should be continued at his school but that the New Canadians should have more opportunities to socialize with other primary children. The fourth comment was to the effect that since over 70% of the pupils of that school come from non-English homes, more time should be given to the Primary New Canadian programme.

5. "Which of the following alternatives do you think is likely to be the most successful in dealing with the problem of teaching New Canadians at the primary level?"

a) no special arrangements (children are part of the regular stream). 1

b) New Canadian Resource Teacher (children taken out of regular classes for special lessons with this teacher). ... 3

c) special class of limited number of New Canadian children (remain together as a group for a full year). 0

d) special class of limited number of New Canadian children (remain together as a group for half a year or as needed) 2

e) other (list) 1

6. "Please discuss the reasons for your choice."

The comments of the six principals who responded to this question are quoted below. (With each quotation is a letter to indicate the response made to item 5, above.)

(i) b) "It succeeds rapidly, and as more New Canadians arrive we change the participants so that there is no waiting period."

(ii) b) "If there is a regular New Canadian teacher working with small groups of children, assistance is available to meet the needs of the children at the necessary level, and at all times during the school term, children enrolled in a regular classroom have the opportunity to work into a regular classroom routine as well as the opportunity to learn from the English speaking children in their class."

(iii) b) "By remaining in regular class for part of the time these young children do benefit.
- learn from other English speaking children
- socialize better
- participate in other activities on regular basis
- do not drop behind in other skill areas

By having special New Canadian language development in small groups they get an added boost which assists them in a more normal development. For our children they should start this earlier than Kindergarten."

(iv) d) "A short time once a day is not long enough to be effective. Much of the rest of the day is wasted for these children if they do not understand what their regular teacher is saying."

(v) d) "A special class of a limited number of New Canadian children who remain together as long as is necessary. This class to be open-ended. Pupils move in or out as the need arises."

(vi) e) "Variations of the above suggestions (a-d) have been tried over the years. It has been found most effective if the New Canadian teacher works with the totally non-English for a substantial time. They may join in large group activity with regular class pupils or other socializing situations. Gradually as facility with the language develops they may be integrated into regular classes for longer periods of time, completely integrating by May or June if possible. However, each year the groups vary and new methods must be developed to meet the current need."

According to the principals their schools used a variety of approaches to the problem of teaching English to Primary New Canadians. It seemed that all principals were fairly satisfied with their current arrangements. Nevertheless, some suggested ways their programmes could be improved. They did not agree on what they thought would be the most successful method. In fact, four different approaches were selected and reasons were given to support their choices.

IV SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Special arrangements for the teaching of English to New Canadians at the primary level have existed in Vancouver for five years. Currently there are programmes in seven schools.

Between February and June, 1971, visits were made by the writers to the seven schools in the study. The most notable feature observed was the wide variation in the arrangements for Primary New Canadians among and within schools. The most commonly used approach involved children leaving

their regular classes to meet in groups with the Primary New Canadian Teacher. This method accounted for part or all of the programme at six schools. These groups varied in size, and in duration and frequency of their lessons. Generally, though, they were composed of 5 to 10 children of a similar age, lessons lasted 25 to 30 minutes, and the children were seen daily. The emphasis was on younger children, i.e., those in Kindergarten and Grade 1. The focus of the programmes was on the development of oral communication. A practical approach to a functional use of English was employed. Several teachers had duties other than teaching groups of Primary New Canadians. Some worked with whole classes containing New Canadians and regular pupils. Other teachers provided remedial help to pupils from regular classes. Consequently, there was no uniformity in the teaching loads. Within the schools changes occur from year to year and during the year. Several schools anticipated different arrangements for next year. The teachers had diverse points of view regarding what was the best approach. Several problems were noted concerning the organization and effectiveness of the programmes.

In June, 1971 questionnaires were completed by the principals of the seven schools. The principals confirmed the writers' observation that their schools used a variety of approaches in teaching English to Primary New Canadians. It seemed that the principals were fairly satisfied that their programmes were successful at teaching English to these New Canadians without impeding the progress of regular pupils. Nevertheless, some principals suggested ways their programmes could be improved. They did not agree on what they thought would be the most successful method. In fact, four different

approaches were selected and reasons were given to support their choices.

Initially, it was hoped some comparison could be made among the different methods used by the schools in terms of their effectiveness in teaching English to Primary New Canadians. However, with so many variables, it was not reasonable to attempt to make such a comparison.

The variety of approaches employed by the schools seems, to the writers, to be entirely appropriate. As needs and resources vary considerably from one school to another it would seem plausible that the programmes should differ. The variety of approaches should be regarded as a strength, a sign of adaptability, and a willingness to seek the most suitable methods.

It should be pointed out, however, that some schools, by deviating widely from the prescribed approach (children leaving their regular classes to meet in groups with the Primary New Canadian Teacher), may risk losing their entitlement for a Primary New Canadian Teacher.

The importance of beginning English instruction in Kindergarten was stressed by several teachers. As language development is a basic objective of Kindergartens, this would seem to support Vancouver's emphasis on the teaching of English to Primary New Canadians at this level. Furthermore, at the pre-school level it seems desirable to have some arrangements for the teaching of English to New Canadians. For those able to participate in such a programme, the first years of school should proceed a little more smoothly than otherwise. One Vancouver school has held successful summer programmes in recent years for these children, despite the fact that the

teaching of pre-school children is not a responsibility of the Vancouver School Board. There can be little doubt that a language programme for New Canadians at the pre-school level is a project worthy of consideration. Evidence gathered in this study strongly supports the continuation and extension of English instruction at the primary level for New Canadian pupils.